Honoring the Soldiers 
and Forgetting Their Cause

American Memories of the Civil War 
and the Second World War

G. Kurt Piehler

In Japan, debates over questions of war and memory are not merely confined to academic circles, but have often involve the public and political leaders, especially with regard to how World War II is remembered. Japan’s commemoration of this war has important bearing on Japan’s relations with several Asian neighbors, most notably China and the Republic of Korea. There has been a long running controversy surrounding the interpretation of the Second World War offered in textbooks read by Japanese high school students, as well as the commemoration of war at the Yasukuni Shrine. Japan is not the only society to grapple with how to commemorate war and this paper will examine how the United States has commemorated two wars—the Civil War and the Second World War—and their crucial role in shaping the American national identity. For many societies—there is a tendency to bury the controversial and blot out the memory of traumatic events. But in the United States the opposite has often taken place regarding the commemoration of war. The most controversial and divisive war in American history—the Civil War has produced the greatest number of war memorials. Thousands were erected to commemorate this conflict and the First World War is a distant second. Compared with either the Civil War or World War I, or even Vietnam—relatively few memorials were erected
to the Second World War. Moreover, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. would be erected and dedicated only seven years after the war ended. By contrast, over half a century elapsed before the United States dedicated a national memorial to the Second World War.\textsuperscript{2}

In considering the place of commemoration of war and American society, it is important to recognize how omnipresent the armed forces are in contemporary America. Almost any major town or city in America will have an office storefront staffed by soldiers, marines, or sailors trying to recruit civilians into the armed services. Some are in prominent locations—one sits near Times Square in Midtown Manhattan in the heart of the Theater District. The U.S. military spends millions of dollars on advertising—and has produced slogans that have entered the consciousness of American society. For instance, many Americans of a certain generation would instantly recognize the slogan, “Be All You Can Be.” War memorials are everywhere—virtually every town of any size will at least have one—while larger cities will have hundreds. Hollywood continues to make a steady stream of movies about war—most about America’s wars. The national anthem of the United States—the Star Spangled Banner—not only describes a battle, but links the symbol of the American flag to war. Although their numbers have been declining, veteran’s organizations have for over a century played an important role in American politics.

Holidays are signifiers that tell the nation’s history. In America, Columbus Day (October) describes how America was discovered, Thanksgiving (November) who settled America and why, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Day (January) remembers the great civil rights leader and Labor Day (September) honors American workers. But many of the other holidays focus on how war, directly or indirectly forged the United States into a nation—Independence Day (Fourth of July), President’s Day (February—commemorate two presidents associated with war—George Washington and Abraham Lincoln), Memorial Day
Veterans in American society have a privileged status that is best reflected in the often generous set of educational, health, and pension benefits offered them. Who is and is not allowed to fight often has been an important signifier to whether a group will be accorded the full rights of citizenship. For instance, white southerners during the antebellum period successfully excluded African Americans from serving in the U.S. Army and U.S. Navy—but the Civil War restored the rights of black Americans to serve in the armed forces. Without this record of military service, it is difficult to imagine the passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution that granted African American men the right to vote. Although discrimination and segregation became the norm for the U.S. military for much of the nineteenth and the first half of the Twentieth Century—the American armed forces would be the first major institution to integrate.

The Civil War and the Enduring Memory of the Battlefield

When considering the forging of an American memory of war, one must recognize the diffuse and decentralized nature of the United States. For instance, the debates surrounding textbooks in the United States are much more complicated since there is no one textbook or standard used in American high schools. Education remains a matter handled by each individual state government and as a result there are 50 different educational systems in the United States. Moreover, many states allow significant autonomy to towns and cities to run schools in the way they see fit. Similarly, most war memorials built since 1783 have not been funded by the U.S. Government, but are usually erected by private organizations or local governments. Many of the symbols and rituals that mark the commemoration of war are inseparably linked with the rise of the modern nation state. For instance, not until the American Civil War was there a
systematic effort to create permanent cemeteries for the common soldiers killed in war. Most common soldiers were buried in hastily dug graves near the battlefield and soon forgotten. During the American Civil War, United States Government decided to establish an elaborate network of cemeteries for those who died defending the Union. Similarly, prior to 1860, few monuments were erected within the United States commemorating the American Revolution, War of 1812 or the Mexican American War. During the early Republic efforts to build war memorials evoked controversy with many arguing they were unsuitable for a republic and smacked too much of the monarchical regimes of Europe.

The decision of the U.S. in 1862 to create cemeteries for the Union war dead reflected the changing attitude toward the common soldier who no longer could be simply tossed into unmarked graves. Families and soldiers themselves expected more—in fact, some union commanders even made provisions for the embalming of their soldiers killed in battle so they could be transported home for burial in hometown cemeteries. In the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln argued in his famous address dedicating Gettysburg National Cemetery in 1863 that the hallowed dead would represent for future generations the democratic values on which the United States was founded and why the Civil War was necessary.  

The thousands of monuments in the American north can easily be explained—many mourn the dead as well as proclaim Union victory. Similarly, veterans of the victorious Union Army created an organization, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), which sought to ensure the gains of the war were not lost, as well as to preserve the ties of comradeship. One of the first major initiatives of GAR would be to encourage veterans and citizens to mark a new holiday—Memorial Day—to mourn the fallen war dead. On Memorial Day (originally May 30) veterans and others marked the graves of Civil War dead with flowers and often had ceremonies remembering their sacrifice on behalf of the nation.
Honoring the Soldiers and Forgetting Their Cause

The North was not alone in commemorating the Civil War. With some significant differences, white southerners memorialized the Civil War much like their counterparts from the North. Excluded from burial in U.S. Government cemeteries, private organizations—Ladies Memorial Associations—took upon the enormous task of finding the graves of Confederate soldiers and burying them in permanent cemeteries. White southerners gathered at cemeteries to mourn the dead—not on May 30—but on a range of different dates in the Spring that soon became known as Confederate Memorial Day. After the war, some returning Confederate veterans in Pulaski, Tennessee formed their own veteran's organization, the Ku Klux Klan, that quickly evolved into a secret society designed to maintain white supremacy and challenged the efforts of the U.S. Government to impose Reconstruction Governments on southern states. Although the Klan would be suppressed and fade for over a generation, a new veteran's organization, the United Confederate Veterans emerged in the late 1880s to preserve the memory of the Civil War and the ties of comradeship among white soldiers.7

The ability of white southerners to memorialize the Civil War is further evidence of the relatively easy terms offered white southerners after they surrendered in 1865. When many civil wars end, they produce a wave of bloodletting with the victors often executing, exiling or imprisoning key rebel leaders. Many rank and file rebels are placed into prison camps and made into outcasts after they are released. Although the federal government did place into custody the Conference President, Jefferson Davis and his vice president for two years, neither were ever charged with treason or other crimes. Although the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution deprived many former Confederate leaders of political rights—many over the course of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries received pardons and had their full political and civil rights restored. In fact, several went to serve in Congress, as cabinet members and within the U.S. military.
Except for a brief period when the south was under military rule during Reconstruction (1865-1877), few efforts were made to interfere with white southerner’s efforts to commemorate the Civil War. Moreover, as William Blair has shown in Cities of the Dead, ceremonies and monuments erected to Confederate war dead during Reconstruction often served as an outlet of protest when the U.S. Army did place restrictions on the political activity of former Confederates. After Reconstruction ended, the federal government not only tolerated southern efforts to commemorate the Civil War, but even supported some of them. For instance, President William T. McKinley not only ordered the internment of Confederate war dead in Arlington National Cemetery, but later during the Administration of Theodore Roosevelt the Daughters of the Confederacy was allowed to erect monument commemorating the Confederate cause. In 1913, the U.S. Army organized a massive reunion of both Union and Confederate veterans who had fought at the Battle of Gettysburg. After the First World War, Congress ordered the U.S. Army to find and locate all unmarked Confederate gravesites and provide a headstone for them.\(^8\)

White southerners efforts to commemorate the Civil War certainly marked a desire to mourn the dead, but it also reflected an unwillingness to acknowledge southern war guilt or that succession in 1861 had been a mistake. Even though most white Southerners after 1865 accepted defeat and recognized the supremacy of the U.S. Government—they continue to the present day a spirited defense of the “Lost Cause.” In short, many white Southerners after 1865 expressed few regrets over going to war to defend the right of sovereign states to leave the Union. In the first one hundred years after the Civil War, most white southerners accepted the abolition of slavery, but also remained adamant that white supremacy remained a crucial and distinctive part of southern culture. During the modern civil rights movement (post 1954), many white southerners underscored their deep rooted opposition to granting African Americans equal rights by displaying
Confederate flags and other symbols of white supremacy. For instance, the Georgia legislature in the 1950s would change the state flag to include a Confederate battle flag. At many rallies held in opposition to the civil rights movement, the Confederate flag was widely displayed. Governor George Wallace would go so far as to fly the flag over the dome of the Alabama state house.9

Of course, there is a more complex story over why white Southerners were granted the right to commemorate the Lost Cause. Certainly, white Northerners, especially after the end of Reconstruction, adopted a policy that sought the quick reintegration of white southerners back into the Union. For the North, the price of reconciliation required white southerners acceptance of federal supremacy, as well as abandoning all talk of succession in future political debates together with the recognition that slavery was through as an institution. Initially, many white northerners who belonged to the Republican Party wanted to remake the South into a biracial society that accorded full political and legal rights to African American men. In the face of intransigent white resistance in the South, as well as the lack of unity in the North, the U.S. Government over the course of the Nineteenth Century gradually abandoned African Americans. As a result, white southerners over the course of the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century gradually deprived African Americans of the right to vote, excluded them from juries, and mandated they use “separate, but equal facilities” (The right of southern states to mandate racial segregation would be accepted by the U.S. Supreme Court in Plessy vs. Fergusson in 1896).

For those who have read such recent works as the Confederates in the Attic, know the Civil War continues to bring forth strong emotions, especially on the part of many white southerners. At the same time, reconciliation after a war so bloody and divisive was hard—there were limits to how much recognition would be extended to the Lost Cause
by many northerners. For instance, many white northerners and black Americans revered Abraham Lincoln after his assassination and made him a martyr for the cause of freedom. Some northern memorials would commemorate the abolition of slavery as one of the great legacies of the war.\textsuperscript{10}

My point—it was sometimes best to change the subject when talking about the Civil War and focus not on what caused the war, but on the fighting itself. Both white northerners and white southerners forged a memory that stressed the mutual bravery of all who fought in this war. Although both sides honored their region’s military heroes, the most common monument built after the war would be statues representing the common soldiers who fought for the Union or those who fought for the Confederacy. Civil War battlefields became major sites of memory and the federal government beginning in 1890 purchased several sites turning them into national military parks.\textsuperscript{11}

Focusing on the bravery and sacrifice of average soldiers struck a responsive chord within American society—certainly it represented a democratization of the war’s memory. Civil War veterans were not only accorded growing public adulation as they aged, but in the case of those who fought for the North a significant range of benefits, including pensions. At the same time, many veterans in remembering the war selectively forgot much about the war, especially the brutality, hatred, fear and destruction that came with it. Reunions between Union soldiers and Confederate soldiers (blue-grey reunions) fostered a climate of nostalgia that stressed comradeship, bravery, and times spent around campfires.

The focus on a memory of the Civil War that centered on battlefield service downplayed the significance of race and slavery to the struggle. David Blight has written about the valiant struggle of Frederick Douglass in the closing years of his life to remind Americans that the Civil War had been a struggle for liberation. By the early 1900s historians perceived
Reconstruction (1865-1877) as a disastrous experiment that placed into power corrupt and tyrannous governments of scalawags, carpetbaggers, and recently freed slaves who suppressed the white southern population. W.E.B. DuBois and other black intellectuals would offer a striking dissent to this interpretation and stress the failed experiment of Reconstruction to remake the South into a biracial democracy.\(^\text{12}\)

The focus on the sacrifice and service of the average soldier would be a pattern of virtually every war that the United States has sought to remember. It loomed particularly large in efforts to forge a memory of the First World War and the Vietnam War. For instance, in the case of the Vietnam War, virtually no memorials were erected to hero generals and instead focus on honoring the rank and file soldiers killed in this conflict. This emphasis on the average soldier is best signified by the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial that contains the names of every soldier who died in this conflict.

**Selective Memories of the “Good War”**

Memory is not fixed—some wars have faded from public memory. Like many former colonial powers, the United States quickly forgot the Philippine Insurrection and made little effort to preserve an official memory of the conflict. Despite an unprecedented effort to forge a national memory of the First World War through monuments, holidays, and national cemeteries—few Americans in the Twenty-first Century know anything about it. In sharp contrast, the memory of the Second World War promises to loom large in the public imagination—even though this conflict produced relatively few war memorials. Only the American Civil War overshadows the Second World War in terms of official memory, as well as public interest as expressed through such metrics as the number of books published and sold about this war, as well as the public attendance...
at motion pictures dealing with it. American veterans of the Second World War were widely hailed in the last two decades by journalists, politicians, and many Americans as “The Greatest Generation.” Historical illiteracy is high, but most Americans have at least some idea about the nature and course of the Second World War.13

Americans often question the wisdom of war, especially after a peace treaty is signed. After the fighting ends, revisionist movements emerge that question whether the resort to war was a wise decision. For instance, one of the most widely used historiographical readers of the 1970s and 1980s had a chapter asking the question whether the Civil War was an irrepressible conflict or whether it could it have been avoided. As diplomatic records were opened and the U.S.S. Maine salvaged, many Americans in the early 1900s concluded that the United States had unwisely rushed to war in 1898 against Spain. After the First World War, the revisionist movement even gained official Congressional sanction in the form of the Nye Committee hearings that stressed how Wall Street and American munitions makers had played a pivotal role in leading America to war against Germany in 1917. In contrast, little postwar ambivalence developed regarding the need to enter the Second World War. (There was a small, but vigorous revisionist movement lead primarily by Old Guard conservatives, but it faded by the early 1960s). The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 did spark remarkable unity—only the aftermath of the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 can one find a similar parallel in the Twentieth Century. The decision by Nazi Germany to declare war on the United States brought an end to a tumultuous debate over whether the United States should fight this Axis power. Until Pearl Harbor, the Second World War had been a controversial war and isolationist critics had questioned the wisdom of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s policies that were leading America into war with Germany.14

This consensus is best signified by the often tepid interest after
Honoring the Soldiers and Forgetting Their Cause

1945 in building war memorials. New overseas cemeteries were built by the American Battle Monuments for the American war dead, but compared with the Civil War or World War I, or even the Spanish American War, relatively few memorials were built—at least until the 1980s. In many cases, communities in the late 1940s and 1950s simply added plaques to their World War I memorials listing the names of the war dead from the Second World War. Other communities opted to build living memorials—utilitarian structures such as hospitals, auditoriums, highways, and parks. Of course, other mediums, especially Hollywood and American television networks, produced scores of works that dealt with the Second World War.

Certainly, the Cold War had an important role in shaping the memory of the Second World War. It definitely encouraged the United States Government to seek reconciliation with former enemies and places limits on the efforts of Occupation Government to reshape German and Japanese society. For U.S. leaders, Allies were desperately needed in the struggle against the Soviet Union, especially in Europe. As a result, not only was West Germany allowed to officially rearm and join NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), but many former German generals under the Nazi regime donned uniforms in the new West German army.

The imperatives of the Cold War might not have been enough to hasten German integration without the Civil War tradition of reconciliation with former enemies. Also, it was certainly aided by the fact that the war in the Western Front differed from the war on the Eastern Front (Germany vs. Soviet Union). With important exceptions, both sides fighting in the West (Britain, Canada, and the U.S. vs. Germany) largely observed the rules of war, especially in accordance to humane treatment of prisoners of war. American combat troops fighting against Germany often had complex attitudes towards their enemy. In my many interviews with veterans of the Second World War, it is often striking how many American GIs made
a sharp distinction between the Nazis and average German soldiers. GIs often viewed the German soldiers as a worthy, if misguided, adversary who fought well. This memory of the war is not one acquired with age, but confirms earlier observations regarding the ideological beliefs of American GIs. In the Second World War, many Americans during the war saw a distinction between the regime that needed to be defeated and the German people. In fact, American leaders during the war were concerned that GIs lacked enough hatred of the Germans as an enemy that it might diminish their fighting effectiveness.¹⁵

There was an unfortunate legacy of this bad Nazi paradigm vs. average German paradigm—during the Cold War we greatly overestimated the number of good Germans. Moreover, it is striking the accolades bestowed on the fighting prowess of the average German soldier, as well as the German generals who lead them. For instance, Erwin Rommel is portrayed not as an enthusiastic general seeking to expand Hitler’s empire—but as a key conspirator in the failed plot to kill him in 1944. In order to learn how to fight the Soviet Union if a “Third World War” erupted, the United States Army extensively interrogated captured German generals who spun a creative web of deception regarding their role and responsibility for the war. In terms of war crimes they professed ignorance or stressed the role of the SS in perpetrating them and blamed military defeat not on Soviet superiority in strategy, tactics, and equipment, but on the ineptitude of Hitler. A significant school of thought emerged among British and American military historians that argued the German Army remained superior, even in comparison with the British or American armies. (This view echoes the assessment that is made by many partisans of the “Lost Cause” who argue Confederate generals and soldiers were better than their northern counterparts, but were overwhelmed by superior numbers. This same argument is made by a number of military historians of World War II with regard to why Germany lost—the German army was superior, but it
was overwhelmed by superior numbers.)^{16}

Is the “bad Nazi” vs. “good German” paradigm exaggerated — probably not. President Ronald Reagan’s decision to visit the German cemetery at Bitburg in 1985 in order to pay tribute to the German war dead offers one of the most convincing examples of how deeply rooted this notion was held in many quarters of American society. This visit would become controversial not because Americans rejected the idea of a U.S. President mourning the death of German soldiers killed in the Second World War, but because the cemetery contained the graves of German soldiers who had fought with the Waffen SS. Given the criminal nature of the SS, it remained simply too offensive for many Americans to see a U.S. President visit a cemetery containing the graves of individuals who had fought for this criminal organization. Despite these protests, including one offered by Elie Wiesel, a survivor who has written extensively on the Holocaust, Reagan went ahead with the visit and defended the German soldier who fought in the Second World War as a victim of the war.^{17}

The desire to do a favor for a German ally certainly explains the decision to visit Bitburg. But Reagan in honoring German soldiers from World War II was also falling back on the Civil War tradition that saw it proper to honor former adversaries who had fought bravely on behalf of their cause. Moreover, Reagan himself a World War II veteran, was not ignorant of German war crimes. During his presidency, Ronald Reagan often spoke movingly about the Holocaust, especially when meeting with Israeli leaders. But Reagan like many Americans did not hold the average German soldier as culpable for the Holocaust and the crimes of the regime and centered blame on the Nazi leadership.

**Fading Memories of the Pacific War**

In the case of Japan, the story is more complicated and the memory
Honoring the Soldiers and Forgetting Their Cause

of the war more selective. For nearly two generations, Pearl Harbor played a central part in the memory of the conflict because it offered a simple explanation for why the United States entered the war. America’s entry into the Second World War against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan occurred after a long series of events—Pearl Harbor is in many ways the culmination of this long string of events. Pearl Harbor also had a special resonance during the Cold War—during the age of nuclear weapons, the lesson of Pearl Harbor was an explicit one—the United States must be militarily prepared to respond to an enemy attack immediately. In a nuclear age, there would be no opportunity offered for the United States to recover from a surprise Soviet attack.\textsuperscript{18}

The other major event of the war would be the atomic bombing of Hiroshima—and from the beginning this produced significant ambivalence for Americans. Although a minority of Americans unabashedly celebrated the use of the atomic bomb, most notably the commander of the \textit{Enola Gay}, Paul Tibbets, and later the literary critic Paul Fussell—Americans, especially in the early postwar period had pronounced fears over the fate of mankind given the existence of atomic weapons. For the peace movement, the atomic bomb represented the ultimate symbol for the utter futility of war. John Hersey’s account of the impact of the bomb on Hiroshima represented one of the first major attempts by an American writer to give the enemy a human face in a war that had been characterized by racist propaganda and brutality.\textsuperscript{19}

Why was so much of the Pacific war so quickly forgotten? This is reflected in part by where the United States opted to build cemeteries for the war dead—initially it had planned them in Asia and the Pacific, but ultimately the war dead were buried either in the Philippines or Hawaii. In sharp contrast, over a dozen American cemeteries were established in North Africa and Europe for the war dead. Although the Pacific War had produced heroes, most notably Douglas Macarthur—it is striking
that it would be Dwight Eisenhower, the senior American general in Europe, the general able to use his military victories to propel himself into the presidency. Many of the battles fought in the Pacific would soon be forgotten and even today it is striking how scant the historical literature is for the war between U.S. and Japan.

There existed one important institution that sought to preserve a strong memory of the war in the Pacific—the U.S. Marines. It is fair to say that the Second World War secured a future for the Marine Corp. Prior to 1941 this branch of the United States Navy seemed destined for eventual extinction and consolidation within the U.S. Army. For the Marines, World War II saw an unprecedented expansion in numbers, as well as a major role in several major campaigns in the Pacific, most notably at Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. Moreover, in contrast to the other American armed services—the Marines only fought in the Pacific and had almost no role in the war against Germany. One of the few significant national monuments built in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War would be the Marine Corps Memorial that rendered in bronze the flag rising on Iwo Jima captured through the photographs of the journalist Joseph Rosenthal. Although identified in the public imagination with World War II, the Marines emphasized the purpose of this memorial as one to commemorate all the battles the Marines fought—listing engagements as far back as the American Revolution. Moreover, the U.S. Marines had a long tradition of cooperating with Hollywood in the making of war films that dealt with the Marine Corps and one of the first major films to deal with the Second World War would be John Wayne's *Sands of Iwo Jima.*

Why did the memory dim for the Pacific War? Why did Hollywood make disproportionately more films about the war in Europe than the war in the Pacific? Why have historians in the United States written by a margin of three to one books about the war in Europe over that in the Pacific? Several factors, can explain it—most notably the nature
of the war in the Pacific—it was a *War without Mercy* that many veterans wanted to forget. It was war, especially given the imperatives of the Cold War, which many American leaders did not want to dwell. At the same time, it was a conflict riddled with ambiguity in contrast to the war against Germany. Although the United States promoted the rapid integration of Germany into the Western Alliance, it was premised on the West German Government ensuring the end of Nazism as a viable political movement. To West Germany’s credit it took responsibility for the Holocaust and not only offered restitution to the State of Israel, but prosecuted several war criminals after the Allied occupation ended. In the case of the war against Japan, the war-time racist tinged propaganda became an embarrassment. Many of the propaganda films made during World War II about Germany were quite good—in fact, some like *Casablanca* are classic American films of great aesthetic brilliance. The same cannot be said about most of the films made about the war against Japan from 1942-1945, they in the postwar era became embarrassing to watch both for simplistic plots and their racist characterizations of the Japanese.\(^{21}\)

One should also say that many combat veterans of the Pacific Theater were traumatized by their experiences and many were reluctant to fully share their stories. Those who are honest about their experiences often tell of a horrendous war where atrocities were committed on both sides. Also, many suppressed memories of hatred, especially when many American elites were unreceptive to hearing them. In my oral history interviews with veterans of the Pacific War, many expressed lingering hatred and resentment of the enemy. Moreover, many think of their enemy in much more racial terms than GIs who fought in Europe. But not all shared these views—many veterans often saw held much more nuanced views—often expressing empathy and respect for their former adversary. For instance, a number of American officers who were trained as Japanese language specialists went on to become scholars of Japanese history and
literature in the postwar era.\textsuperscript{22}

The need for allies during the Cold War played a significant part in encouraging a selective memory of this conflict. It also contributed to forestalling international events that sought to mark and commemorate the war in the Pacific and Asia. For instance, the American president routinely gathered with leaders of other former Western Allies (i.e., Britain, France, Canada, etc. and more recently with German and Russian) leaders every ten years to mark anniversaries of the invasion of Normandy, France on June 6, 1944. In contrast, the success of the Communist Revolution in China diminished interest in remembering this World War II ally in postwar commemorations and memory. There emerged no similar gathering of Allies in Asia marking victory in the war in the Pacific/Asia comparable to the June 6, 1984 or June 6, 1994 or June 6, 2004 ceremonies held at Normandy.

Not only did the Cold War and the growing importance of postwar Japan as an ally, as well as major trading partner, serve to dim the memory of the Pacific War, but the recent war on terrorism has played an even more significant role. The events of September 11, 2001 may serve to diminish the memory of one of the most remembered events of the Pacific War—the attack on Pearl Harbor. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11—many in the media compared the terrorist attacks with Pearl Harbor. But since 2001, 9/11 has taken place of Pearl Harbor as the preeminent symbol for politicians, journalists, and other Americans of the dangers of Americans being unprepared for attack.\textsuperscript{23}

Similarly, the post 9/11 era witnessed a renewal of fears regarding nuclear weapons this time in the hands of terrorists or rogue nation states. For a brief period in the 1990s with the Cold War over, there was an almost unquestioned assumption in some quarters of American society that the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima was both necessary and a “good thing.” Those who cared about the memory of this event, especially
national veteran's groups and group of Republican Congressional leaders, successfully challenged the efforts of the Smithsonian Institution to mount an exhibition in 1995 that sought to cast doubt on the wisdom of the United States using nuclear weapons to end the war in 1945. This debate became ugly and bellicose and probably for a generation dampened interest of a major museums dependent on government funding to tackle an exhibit that looks at the use of atomic bomb. This sentiment also discouraged exhibits that seek to defend the bomb—when the Smithsonian put the *Enola Gay* on public display it offered almost no conceptualization of the role of this plane during the war or the significance of the atomic bomb.24

Not everything about the memory of the Second World War and the Pacific has been forgotten. There has been a sustained interest within American society to remember the mistreatment of Japanese Americans. Without “due process” or trial, Japanese American citizens living on the West Coast were forced to leave their homes and move to camps in the interior of the United States. Racism remained the most important factor in the decision to relocate Japanese Americans and this fact would be quickly acknowledged at the end of the war. By the 1950s many college and high school textbooks routinely denounced the Japanese American internment as unconstitutional, unnecessary and in some cases compared the internment camps to concentration camps. By the late 1980s, the United States Congress passed legislation authorizing a formal apology to Japanese Americans who had been unjustly interned and offered modest compensation. By the 1990s, the U.S. Government established the Manzanar National Historic Site on the site of a former internment camp to ensure the Japanese American internment would be remembered.25

Finally, Hollywood for the Second World War continues to be an important source of memory and commemoration. Although most films focus on the war in Europe—Clint Eastwood recent *Letters from Iwo Jima* offered American movie audiences a new take on the ground war in the
Pacific. In contrast to the host of earlier films that make Japanese soldiers into caricatures, Eastwood portrayed the Japanese soldiers and officers as complex human beings who experience the full range of emotions. In a sense, Eastwood was falling into an old formula that dates back to the Civil War—honor the enemy for their strength of character and courage. An American audience watching *Letters from Iwo Jima* would have a difficult time not respecting Eastwood’s depiction of the Japanese commander on Iwo Jima as a virtuous and professional soldier who was doing his duty as he saw fit. Not only is Eastwood’s hero concerned with the safety of civilians, the welfare of his men, but he is an able commander staging a brilliant defense under hopeless odds—fighting a “Lost Cause.” One of the most fascinating scenes is one of the few in which English is spoken—when the hero of the movie is having a flash back sequence recalling his days as an official visitor to an U.S. Army base during the interwar years. In this scene, the hero is attending a formal dinner with his American counterparts and is asked by the wife of one of the senior officers: “would you kill my husband if you met him in battle?” The Japanese officer begs off from answering this question and declares he does not see the prospect of war between Japan and the U.S.—but when pressed upon this point, he answers says, yes he who shoot her husband if met as adversaries on the battlefield. Although the wife is appalled by the answer, the American officer at the table salutes the Japanese commander for his willingness as a professional soldier to do what is expected of him in war.

Does honoring the virtues and heroism of average soldiers and generals contribute to militarism? Can one really say that Confederate soldiers who fought to perpetuate regimes that held men in chattel slavery deserve to be honored? The same question can certainly be asked about the decision of President Reagan to honor the memory of German soldiers who died in the Second World War fighting for a genocidal regime. In posing these questions, I want to indicate the complexity of the memory of war in
American society. For instance, I am supportive of remembering and even honoring soldiers who fought in war—and it is my own personal belief that to be a soldier can be an honorable profession. At the same time, I am well aware of the risks of forging a memory of war that encourages citizens to forget the reasons why a nation went to war.

G. Kurt Piehler is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Tennessee. In 2008, Professor Piehler taught American Studies at Kobe University and Kyoto University as a Fulbright Lecturer. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at lectures sponsored by Saitama University and Nanzan University. The author expresses his appreciation to Ichiro Miyata of Saitama and Michiaki Okuyama of Nanzan for their invitations and hospitality. The author wants to also acknowledge the opportunity offered by Juri Abe to speak at Rikkyo University and the assistance also offered by Rio Okumura.

Notes


7. Gaines M. Foster, Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865-1913 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Cynthia Mills and Pamela H.


11. Foster, Ghosts of the Confederacy, passim. There is no reference work or electronic database that accounts for all war memorials built in the United States—the most comprehensive source is the Art Inventories Catalogue, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Smithsonian Institution Research Information System (SIRIS) siris-artinventories.si.edu.


